



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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the hollow trunk, or "stock" of a tree, while their cousins, the ring and turtle doves, build their slight platform nurseries among the branches. Stock-doves are not very particular as to nesting sites, for they constantly build in holes in cliffs, like the white-backed rock-dove of seaboard crags, and will even rear their squabs in a deserted rabbit hole in a steep bank.

Just above the cliff, the close turf is sprinkled with flakes of chalk, some as large and heavy as a walnut. They cannot have been here long, for the first frost will reduce any small lump of chalk left on the surface to powder. It is evident that the strong south-west wind which sweeps in with such violence from the sea has first detached, and then lifted them over the edge of the cliff, and dropped them on the hill above. I have found these chalk flakes in profusion along the cliffs at Rottingdean, where, as Rudyard Kipling says:—

"The wise turf cloaks the white cliff edge,
As when the Romans came."

A few yards farther, and I am reminded of the remaining lines of the verse:—

"What sign of those who fought and died
At shift of sword and sword?
The barrow and the camp abide
The sunlight and the sward."

For over yonder, on the rounded hill which lies on the farther side of a deep ravine, are the banks which mark the outline of a Roman camp, and at my feet is a green barrow, obviously a grave of long ago. The depression in the centre, though now thickly covered with turf, shows that the barrow has been opened. Local tradition says that these grave mounds, which are so frequent on our hill tops were explored by treasure seekers about a century ago. One remained intact, and was opened by Colonel Lane Fox, assisted by my father, while the British Association was being held at Brighton, in 1873. They found a female skeleton in a sitting posture, apparently a prehistoric lady of moderate means, for only a small bronze dagger and a few blue beads were found beside it. If the openers of the other barrows were seeking for valuables, not for light on prehistoric man, they probably were much disappointed.

Below me, spread out like a map, lies the Weald of Sussex, so beautifully described by Wilfred S. Blunt, in his sonnet "Chanctonbury Ring":—

"Say what you will, there is not in the world
A nobler sight than from this upper Down,
No rugged landscape here, no beauty hurled
From its Creator's hand as with a frown,
But a green plain, on which green hills look down
Trim as a garden plot."

When the barrow on which I am standing was reared in honour of some prehistoric chieftain, the Weald was probably anything but trim, but a vast forest of giant oaks, which in later centuries were felled to feed the furnaces where the Sussex iron was smelted. As the country was cleared of available timber, the trade drifted away to northern districts where the coal measures lie in convenient proximity to the iron ore. The railings around St. Paul's Cathedral are said to be of Sussex iron, and in many a secluded farm house the old embossed fire-backs and massive "dogs" are still in use.

Primitive man, with his meagre tools of flint and bronze, was quite unable to attempt clearings in the sturdy oak forest, which was also haunted by savage wild beasts, so the first attempts at agriculture were probably made on these bare and somewhat barren hill tops. Narrow terraces and ridges in the turf are pointed out as traces of this early cultivation, and if you examine a mole-hill on this particular hill top you will frequently find fragments of very rough pottery, so rough that probably the vessels were very short-lived, which accounts for the multitude of fragments.

On a patch of bare earth thrown out by rabbits from their burrows, you can always find this pottery, together with flints showing the action of fire, and my brother and I have each picked up there a fragment of a flat, whitish tile, with some rough attempt at ornament of diagonal lines. These may have been part of a tiled hearth of some semi-underground hut, dug out of this steep back, and perhaps the pride of the heart of some prehistoric house-keeper. But where, oh, where, did she get her water supply? Even if her simple ideas did not reach washing, either of person or pots, her family could not do without drink. A couple of unfailing "dewponds" are on the crest of the hill, but the discovery of

the possibility of collecting water by condensation is a comparatively modern one, and the nearest springs are far below in the Weald.

Down the steep hillside, and passing into copses at the foot, I note the beauty of the lithe, purple-brown sprays of the bare beech boughs, rising from the round, grey trunks. These beeches, on either side of a lane which skirts the edge of the Downs, are the very pride of the neighbourhood where trees are scarce. When I was a child the ground beneath them was yellow with primroses, now not a root remains, all having fallen victims to the greedy tripper from the nearest large town with whom this is an all too popular resort. The greasy sandwich paper, objectionable though it is, soon decays away in damp weather, but second-rate picnic parties seem to make a practice of smashing the bottles in which they have brought their drinkables, leaving the dangerous and imperishable fragments strewn around. It is a thoughtless and cruel habit, not only to the little children who run barefooted in the modern wholesome fashion, but also to sheep and cattle, between whose divided hoofs the glass sometimes becomes wedged, causing much suffering.

I notice that the shells of this copse are quite different to those of the hill turf. There were strewn the heath snail (*Helix ericetorum*), the striped zoned snail (*Helix virgata*), and the blacktip (*Helix caperata*)—dead shells, cleaned out by those busy scavengers the ants, are all that are to be seen in March, the live snails being all tucked away in their winter quarters at the roots of the salad burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba*), and rare field senecio (*Senecio campestris*), which is very abundant on this hillside. In the copse the commonest shells are the ruddy snail (*Helix rufescens*), and the pretty little elegant cyclostome (*Cyclostoma elegans*), looking more like a sea than a land shell. It is the shape of a whelk, with a pink, or purple tip, and when alive is furnished with a little round trap door, or operculum. When a cyclostome is crawling on dewy plants, this door is folded back, but if you pick up the shell, it closes with a snap, and the little creature within is safely shut up in its castle, which no bird's beak or carnivorous beetle can penetrate. Under the beech trees may be found two long spiral shells, *Clausilia laminata* and *Clausilia nigricans*, and

if you look closely among the moss, the *Vitrina pellucida* also, exactly like a bubble of thin, greenish glass.

The hazel bushes are covered with their graceful catkins, or "lamb's tails" as the children call them, and by close examination we may also find on the same twig the wee crimson tassel which is the true blossom of the nut.

I cross some fields, noting here and there signs of spring, which would take too long to chronicle, and pause on the path which leads above the mossy wheel of an old water mill. It is not working, and in the clear water of the mill dam I can see the spotted backs of some fine trout, sailing among the masses of *Elodea*, or Canadian weed, an unwelcome alien, which although only introduced into England in the middle of the nineteenth century, now fills almost every water course with its choking growth.

The celandines are shining like little suns on the bank of the upper mill pond which faces the south, and the moor-hens are paddling about with their quick, jerking motion and occasional sharp cry.

An unpleasantly strong scent of onion reminds me that I am treading on the newly sprouted leaves of the garlic (*Allium ursinum*), which in April will cover this stream-side copse with a delicate white mist, beautiful to look at, but nauseous to pick. A tiny runnel joins the main stream in the garlic copse, and I am interested to notice for the first time that it has some petrifying quality which has coated twig, and shell, and the bristling covers of last year's beech mast with silicious deposit, which will render their shapes permanent when the vegetable fibre shall have decayed away.

Here are some curious fungoid growths on a decayed ash stem, and among the fallen twigs we are likely in damp spring weather to find the velvety carmine cups of the peziza, or Jew's ear.

Not half of the wealth of that one walk has been recorded here. To the quick eye, Nature is ever lovely and full of interest to those who are disposed to search out her secrets, even in a common-place neighbourhood of rural England.